

BOOK REVIEW

Wisselgren: Social Science in Sweden

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Per Wisselgren, *The Social Scientific Gaze: The Social Question and the Rise of Academic Social Science in Sweden*

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Per Wisselgren has written a remarkable account of an extraordinary series of events in the period of pre-academic reformist social science. The story is about a bequest by a sickly student enthralled by the German historical school of economics, and of the prospects of sociology as a means of social transformation. The bequest was to create a foundation. Shortly after it was drafted and signed, its author put it into effect by killing himself. Wisselgren tells his story, and the story of the student's intellectual and familial milieu, in a sensitive and compelling way that takes one back to an era in which "the social" and the poor were being discovered and conceptualized.

The donor, Viktor Loren, had a that was childhood marked by the death of his parents. He grew up with a literary, intellectual family—the Leffler's—where he was close to the daughter, Anne Charlotte. She became a prominent writer and force in the Loren Foundation. Loren's father was an alcoholic Goteborg brewer who, After his wife's death, first passed the young Viktor to a business family, who became his guardians, and then on to the Lefflers. Viktor was wealthy enough to pursue whatever life he wanted. But, after a brief and unhappy stint as a student in Uppsala, he went to Germany and, as a student at Leipzig, got caught up in the discussion of "The Social Question." He took courses given by Wilhelm Roscher and Wilhelm Wundt, as well as statistics and history and he read Adolf Wagner. According to him, he became "half a Katheder Socialist" (65).

The date was 1877. The social question had barely emerged in Sweden as a respectable topic per se, much less an academic one. Wisselgren describes the experiences of Swedish academics who became interested in the poor and in the social question in this and earlier periods as not on a path to success. The political options were not promising. Viktor denied that he was a Social Democrat. He agreed with their demands, and rejected attacks on them, but thought that the forces arrayed against them were too strong. Like the Fabians and the *Verein fuer Sozialpolitik*, which Wisselgren discusses, Viktor thought reform required another path; social science. But, with the exception of economics, there was no social science in Swedish universities and resistance to this was also strong.

Viktor caught a bad cold during his first year in Germany, and spent much of the next few years reading, thinking and travelling in warmer climates. He absorbed the social science of the time, in which socialism and Darwinism were prominent themes. He wrote a “dissertation” on his ideas about social science, but it was never of sufficient quality to present at a German university. His health continued to decline, presumably a result of tuberculosis, and he devoted his energies to his last will and testament. This established a foundation for the support of social science and the scientific study of the social question. In December of 1885 he shot himself.

Here the story shifts to the execution of the will, and how Loren’s fortune was spent. Loren selected five board members who made the decisions. Wisselgren reconstructs their thinking as a kind of “thought-collective.” They worked from scratch; there was no established social science to which to give money. So the money went into development supporting training of native talent, mostly in Germany. From the beginning, those supported aimed at getting into university positions both new and established, which required effort on multiple fronts. There was a “chicken and egg” element to this: positions were needed, but also people to fill them. There was also the question of why existing academic resources were not sufficient, economics was already somewhat established, but still fragile. Economics, however, was to be the bridge to academic positions.

Lawyers have a saying: where there is trust, there is a lawsuit! Loren’s Gothenburg relatives contested his will. The suit failed, but it delayed the implementation of the foundation. The responsibility fell on five trustees, including his friend Anne Leffler and her brother Johann, a physician named Key, an academic economist from Uppsala named Davidson, and Sonja Kovalevsky, a mathematics professor and literary figure close to the Lefflers. The list is unusual, but not out of step with other reformist movements of the era that tended to comprise doctors, scientists, economists, and literary types in avant-garde circles. What is fascinating about Wisselgren’s treatment is that he has miniaturized the complex and confusing picture of social movements of the period in Sweden to fit the small and tightly-knit bourgeoisie of the Swedish capitol, a city that contained all of the elements of the larger society.

Because of the small scale, the number of individuals involved is both small and intimately associated and so Wisselgren is able to give, in spite of limited archival material, a very striking portrait of the participants, the milieu, and the motivations of the people involved. This makes this a unique contribution to a literature that is now expanding on the lives of the reformers. It is comparative with *Envisioning Sociology: Victor Branford, Patrick Geddes, and the Quest for Social Reconstruction*, by John Scott and Ray Bromley (2013). The Swedish situation differs in some interesting respects, however: the importance for social discussion of playwrights, notably Strindberg, and literature generally, especially in relation to “the Social Question”; and the relative accessibility of both parliamentary and academic institutions. Wisselgren makes much of the role of literature and literary depiction in relation to, and also partly as a rival to, the nascent idea of a social science.

There is one other fascinating difference. Many of the nineteenth century social reform movements were religiously related and/or motivated. In the case of, Comte’s religion of humanity it was an actual church, or, in the case of Branford and Geddes, greatly concerned with the spiritual aspects of social life. In contrast, Loren and his friends were not only Darwinians, like most of the pre-academic self-described sociologists, but also materialists in the sense of Turgenev’s Bazarov. This attitude appears in Loren’s own writings though, as Wisselgren notes, there is some ambiguity as to whether this is representative of Loren’s own standpoint. In any case, the reformism of Loren himself is remarkably free of anything to do with religion.

So what did the foundation do? Its initial work was very similar to the work of the labor statistics movement, which was developing elsewhere. It collected facts about income, household budgets, and work hours, as well as interviewing managers and working families. Wisselgren notes that this was also LePlay's method which, incidentally, was also taken up by Branford and Geddes. Objectivity was the goal. Being "scientific" was understood in terms of objectivity and objectivity was understood as presenting statistics. But presenting was only part of the problem; facts had to be acquired and there were no established methods. Methods had to be made up on the spot. These problems were common to other, contemporary statistical operations involving data on labor: sampling—getting responses, finding ways to make the responses understandable by consulting managers and owners as well as employees, and delimiting research domains, all of which was done by surveying occupations. The Loren foundation started with bakers, moving on to other types of work, such as seamstresses. Wisselgren tells us a good deal about who the surveyors were and how they worked. They were more like inspectors, travelling and observing people and settings. But they did work on a large scale collecting data and employing assistants. Urban von Felitzen collected data on 24,760 individuals. One assistant, Anna Soderberg, collected "information about just over 2,600 female workers by visiting them in their homes every day with a 22-item questionnaire" (171) over a period of two years. Wisselgren notes that this was work undertaken by the upper-middle class about the lower classes. Inevitably it reflected class-based social attitudes.

Careers, however, presented a problem. Johann Leffler was eager to get a stable academic position, but there was the problem of qualifications, in addition to that of having a position into which to go. The foundation jump-started the process of creating a Chair by sponsoring lectures at the University College of Stockholm. The foundation also funded—over a long period of time and at great cost—the European education of three figures: Knut Wicksell; Gustav Steffen; and Gustav Cassel. The story of with whom they studied and visited is fascinating as an insight into the topography of late nineteenth century social science and reformism.

Eventually the money ran out, but it was spent more or less as Loren intended with happy results, in this sense at least. The work reached the public and stimulated concern for reform. The State did step in and engage with the problems as well as start collecting labor statistics. By the turn of the century, universities were opening up to social science, and the favored beneficiaries of the Loren foundation were given professorial chairs. This was, as Wisselgren puts it, "the academic breakthrough." And it was a significant one—Wisselgren recounts in detail the twisted paths that had led to these positions in each of the three cases, and the long periods of precarious and dependent living they had endured. Moreover, as he makes clear, their support by the foundation was dependent on a board which did not agree, in its later incarnations, on their merits, and fell out with some of the people it had heavily supported in the past. This was the underside of the coziness of intellectual life in Stockholm; everyone knew everyone else and had opinions to match.

There is an odd coda to this. The three people whose international education the foundation supported had backgrounds in science and mathematics. Academic opportunities for sociology came combined with economics. The focus of the Loren foundation had been the labor part of reform, rather than the myriad of other issues that were present elsewhere and, indeed, in Sweden itself. This led to the odd result that Swedish sociology became bound up with economics, and in particular in this generation, with the new marginalism and what became neo-classical economics. Wicksell in particular was a brilliant mathematicizer. They each had access to the press and were journalistically inclined. Again, this was not entirely uncharacteristic of international sociology: Giddings and Park were both working journalists for much of their working lives. But in the smaller echo chamber of



Sweden—and particularly the Uppsala-Stockholm region—what they said and did made a difference, and provoked controversies. What this failed to lead to was the creation of a distinct discipline of sociology. But it did bring about a social policy orientation that arguably led directly to the Swedish welfare state.

Wisselgren does an outstanding job of explaining who the participants were, the role of literature, the details of the decision-making process and finances of the foundation. He reveals the complexity of a series of events that might pass unnoticed, and recaptures the motives and actions of people who were not important social scientists, but who were the enthusiasts for social science that made possible social science as an institutional fact. Viktor Loren is a curious and anomalous case. Giving ones life in this way for the hope represented by the social sciences is unique. But he was not alone in his belief in the prospects of social science based reform, a belief that somehow took hold in this period in spite of the meager evidence for it. This belief—really a form of faith—was an essential condition for the academic fields that eventually emerged. We are in his debt for this deeply thought through study.